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“I’m Glad We Don’t Have to See Him Anymore”: Mother-Child Interactions in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence

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ABSTRACT. The long-term detrimental effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on abused women and their children are well-documented. However, how IPV affects the mother-child relationship and its resistance to IPV have not received significant attention. Drawing on a strength-based feminist approach, this study focuses on the role that mother-child interactions play in an IPV context. Using grounded theory, a secondary data analysis on interviews with 11 abused mothers revealed different forms and patterns of exchanges between mothers and children, suggesting insights into the dynamics of mother-child interactions that reflect acts of resistance in an IPV context. A proposed conceptual model illustrates this process and suggests next steps for further delineating these connections.

Keywords: IPV, mother-child, protection, resistance, violence

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“I’m glad we don’t have to see him anymore”: Mother-child interactions in the context of intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a prevalent health concern (CDC, 2022) with far-reaching impacts among women and children (Kimball, 2016; Levendosky et al., 2017). While most IPV studies tend to focus on individual outcomes, few have concentrated on the mother-child relationship (Buchanan et al., 2015), and those that do typically take a deficit-based approach. Abused mothers are often characterized as deficient in protecting their children (Boeckel et al., 2017) and children are deemed passive victims (Katz, 2015). Mother-child interactions in the context of IPV are another limitation in the literature, which in a broad sense includes implicit and explicit verbal and non-verbal interactions (Zywiczynski et al., 2017) and which serves as a central facet of a mother-child relationship (Lippold et al., 2021). Such exchanges can be especially crucial when contending with abuse and control, given the inherent danger they continually face together (Babin & Palazzolo, 2012). Drawing on a feminist approach, we explore this theme to better understand mother-child interactions in an IPV context. In this study, using a secondary data analysis of qualitative interviews with a sample of abused mothers, we looked at the unique nature of mother-child exchanges and explored the dynamics of these interactions in the IPV context.

Background Literature

In general, there is an idealized form of mothering in modern society, one where if a mother “falls short” of these expectations, she is often ostracized or criticized (Peled & Gill, 2011). Mothering in IPV relationships involves parenting in the context of additional challenges (e.g., the constant fear of abuse, fear of harm to their children, isolation, and coercion; Buchanan et al., 2014). A recurring theme in the literature focuses on maternal protection of children, the ultimate protective act being to leave their abusers (Buchanan et al., 2015; Pells et al., 2016), even if leaving poses heightened risks, including death (Campbell et al., 2021). In reality, “leaving” an abuser is a complex, non-linear process that often entails multiple attempts over an extended period of time, and cycles of “backing and forthing” with calculated risks and benefits of leaving versus staying constantly being made (Chang et al., 2006; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007), all of which are further complicated when children are involved. Other acts of protection, which can also be considered forms of resistance among women and children, include both cognitive and emotional processes (Crann & Barata, 2016; Bermea et al., 2020); physical uses of formal and informal networks; active resistance; and placation (Goodman et al., 2003). Another form of both protection and resistance relates to mothers’ attempts to shield their children from exposure to IPV, but they do not always realize the extent to which their children are exposed to or harmed by IPV (Humphreys et al., 2006; van Rooij et al., 2015). At the same time, children do not always recognize their mothers’ acts of protection, which can adversely affect their relationship over time (Buchanan et al., 2015).

Despite characterizations of children in IPV homes as detached witnesses, more recent studies portray them as immersed in emotionally charged environments (Callaghan et al., 2016), constantly aware of the tension, and affected by what they see (Kimball, 2016). As such, children also deploy various strategies to protect themselves and resist the violence, including listening to music, caretaking of others, substance abuse, and self-isolation (Louis & Johnson, 2017). Some may verbally and physically intervene or call for help (Buchanan et al., 2015; Pells et al., 2016). Yet, what appears to be largely absent from the literature is how mothers and children interact in the context of IPV and what those interactions signify.

Of the few studies that focus on mother-child interactions in the IPV context, most focus on the post-separation phase, which can be challenging for mothers due to feelings of shame and guilt (Stanley et al., 2012). Mothers report wanting to speak with their children about the abuse but are unsure how to do so. Those with younger children may avoid discussion of IPV to preserve their children's innocence (Insetta et al., 2015). Meanwhile, when older children ask their mothers about IPV, mothers' openness and directness can positively influence the child's adjustment and behavior (McDonald et al., 2011). Indeed, such exchanges may contribute to improving mother-child relationships that may have lagged or deteriorated in the context of IPV; for example, after talking about the abuse, children reported feeling better about themselves and felt mothers to be more emotionally available (McManus et al., 2013). Such forms of repair in the relationship may be especially crucial in situations where abusers coerce children to undermine mothers or turn children against their mothers (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017), which they may be compelled to do out of fear of the abuser.

Non-verbal exchanges also represent meaningful interactions that affect emotional regulation and serve as cues about children's feelings (Colegrove & Havighurst, 2017). As early as infancy, non-verbal interactions can affect the mother-child bond; bidirectional, reciprocal exchanges teach mother and child to decipher and predict each other's behavior (Beebe & Steele, 2013). Yet, such important exchanges may be significantly affected among parents who experienced trauma as their ability to process or respond to infants may be impaired (Schechter & Willheim, 2009). Thus, non-verbal interactions are helpful to consider with respect to younger children, as well as in contexts where it can be dangerous to speak explicitly (Babin & Palazzolo, 2012) or when the mother-child relationship has been adversely impacted (McManus et al., 2013).

To our knowledge, few studies have considered interactions between mother and child while living with abuse and control, especially non-verbal ones. In an IPV context, it is possible that interactions between mothers and children take on added meaning or have multiple purposes. According to Callaghan et al. (2016), children exposed to IPV are "able to return this often wordless communication, finding strategies to articulate their woundedness, and their resistance to victimisation, in embodied and material strategies that enable them to express and resist the coercive control of the perpetrator," (p. 416). The current study aims to further explore this exact dynamic and gain some preliminary understanding of mother-child exchanges in the IPV context, based on observations and descriptions of interactions offered by a subsample of abused mothers. Hence, guided by a feminist framework, our work is centered on two research questions: 1) What is the nature of mother-child interactions in the IPV context? and 2) What do these dynamics reveal about the mother-child relationships in the IPV context?

Theoretical Framework

Campbell (2000) posits that feminist theory supports "[recognition] and [reflection] upon the emotionality of women's lives" (p. 783). In other words, feminist theory allows us a deeper understanding of how women feel about their varied experiences. Hence, we applied a feminist framework that would enable us to examine understudied relational processes in daily, domestic life (Hesse-Biber, 2012) of women and children, such as verbal and non-verbal interactions. Such an approach entails examining often overlooked aspects such as emotion (i.e., feelings, reactions, sentiments) and intuition (i.e., understanding or knowledge without the need for conscious reasoning or analytical thought) conveyed (Daly, 2003) through women's voices in these interviews. In doing so, we gain a deeper appreciation of their lived experience (i.e., their interpretations of their own realities) with their children (Hundleby, 2012). Importantly, a feminist lens also highlights a strength-based perspective (Buchanan et al., 2014) and women's and children's agency and resistance in the context of IPV (Crann

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& Barata, 2016). In focusing on women's descriptions of situations they have lived through (Campbell & Mannell, 2016) and interactions with their children in the IPV context, our study extends existing IPV work that acknowledges the active planning and strategizing of abused women to survive and maintain safety for themselves and their children (Bermea et al., 2020).

Method

Original Study

The original study was conducted by the second author (Khaw & Hardesty, 2015); the first author was not involved in the original study. The study's aim was to explore changes in family relationships and boundaries over the course of leaving an abusive partner. A total of 25 participants were recruited from various rural and urban areas in the Midwest, both online (through targeted community websites) and physical locations using recruitment flyers (e.g., shelters, shops, etc.). Women were screened for eligibility based on if they had at least one child younger than 18 and had been threatened or physically hurt more than once by the abuser from whom they had separated at any point (notwithstanding the current status of their relationship). All interviews were conducted by the second author, who met with participants in mutually agreed upon safe locations such as a campus office or shelters, with several choosing to be interviewed by phone.

The second author developed the interview questions and protocol in consultation with scholars with prior experience in qualitative research with IPV survivors. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with questions kept open-ended and prompts that would invite participants to delve deeper when recounting their experiences in chronological order of the relationship, from: "Tell me about the time when your relationship with your (former) partner began" to "Describe the first time when you were aware that there was a problem with your relationship," "What were some of the reasons why you left," and "How has your family changed compared to the beginning of your relationship?" Interviews averaged just over two hours, were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored safely while ensuring the anonymity of participants. Memos were drafted to reflect on those interviews (Khaw & Hardesty, 2015).

While the original study yielded important findings on how mothers engage in the process of leaving, the study was limited in several ways. First, there was potential for self-selection bias as mothers had self-identified to fit the selection criteria in the recruitment materials. Additionally, all accounts were retrospective, which relied heavily on past memories of particularly challenging moments in the mothers' lives (Khaw & Hardesty, 2015).

Current Study

Of the original 25 interviews, a sub-sample of 11 was found most relevant to this current work. Interviews were determined relevant if mothers had children living with them in the context of coercive controlling violence (Johnson, 2008) and if during their interview they offered significant details about their perception of how their children were affected by the abuse. In other words, although all 25 participants had been asked the same set of questions, only a few of which focused on their children, the 11 participants included in this study had volunteered many details about their children's behaviors and actions prior to, during, and/or after the abuse, as well as their children's relationships with themselves and the abusers.

In this subset of 11 mothers, their ages ranged between 23 and 47 years ($M = 35$), and they had some high school to post-master's education ($M =$ some college). They self-identified as Black ($n = 6$), Latina ($n = 2$), Biracial ($n = 2$), and White ($n = 1$). Mothers' relationships averaged 6.7 years, either in

marriage ($n = 5$) or in dating/cohabiting relationships ($n = 6$). They had between one and three children ($M = 2$), ranging between the ages of one and 23 years old ($M = 8$); children's age at the time of last separation averaged 4.6 years old. In most cases, children were shared with abusers; in one case, where the abuser played a father figure role but was not biologically related to the children.

In the current secondary data analysis, grounded theory analysis procedures were employed, as guided by Saldaña (2015). Grounded theory helped our team see beyond standard paradigms, making “implicit views, actions, and processes more visible.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). Our team was comprised of two scholars, one specializing in women's decision-making processes in IPV relationships and the other on the gendered work of mothering. First, our team individually performed initial coding of all transcripts of mothers' descriptions of reported interactions with their children, followed by a closer coding of the nature and directionality of the exchanges (i.e., mother to child or child to mother). In addition, we identified patterns in interactions, such as the explicitness of each interaction. A more “explicit” message includes a child's verbal comment or an observed action in a given moment whereas a “less explicit” message involves children's subtle behavioral changes noticed over time, or gestures or comments that were not registered in real-time but recognized after the fact. Initial codes were discussed as a group, followed by a second cycle of theoretical and focused coding.

A subsequent round of focused coding, which included axial coding, helped identify sub-categories of codes (Charmaz, 2014). For example, we examined the verbal and non-verbal nature of each interaction. The quote, “[my daughter] said she was scared to have him here” in the aftermath of a violent episode the daughter had just witnessed was coded as a verbal interaction. “[My son] seemed like he was depressed or withdrawn a lot,” an observation the mother had made due to a change in her son's behavior, was coded as a non-verbal cue. When evident, we also explored the temporal aspect of the exchanges (i.e., how they evolved over time). Throughout the coding processes, codes were defined and discussed until a consensus was reached between the two authors. A feminist lens kept us attuned to a strength-based, agentic understanding (Buchanan et al., 2014) of mothers' observations of their children's behaviors amidst experiences of IPV in the context of coercive control.

Findings

Our analysis revealed two main types of interactions between mothers and children, both of which involved iterative (i.e., repeated over time) signaling but were still distinct in nature: 1) iterative signaling and delayed understanding and 2) iterative signaling realized in relation to a triggering event. Iterative signaling and delayed understanding entailed signals, more frequently initiated by children, such as a cry, giggle, gesture, or other verbal expressions. These subtle, ambiguous signals occurred repeatedly, often resulting in a delayed understanding over time that eventually led mothers to act. Iterative signals realized in relation to a triggering event also involved repeated inconspicuous signals over time but became clearer to mothers due to a triggering event, which also helped them make sense of their children's prior signals and acts. Mothers also described actions that represented signals to their children. Across all 11 narratives, a gradual understanding of children's signals seemed to have emerged over time and was taken into consideration when making decisions about their relationships. In some cases, the analysis yielded more questions than findings for us, which we further delineate below.

Iterative Signaling and Delayed Understanding

Mothers described delayed or gradual understanding of children's iterative signals that became incrementally clearer in meaning and intent. For example, Mother 9 had two toddlers before meeting the abuser and a third child with the abuser, who exerted coercive control, which included erratic and unpredictable behavior such as showing up at unexpected times and places. In relation to her children,

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Mother 9 reported her gradual understanding of their signals, particularly her youngest son's subtle and iterative cues on multiple occasions. When her abuser used to "just show up, and a lot of times I'm not paying attention [but] the kids are." For example, her son giggled whenever the abuser arrived, which is "when I would figure out [the abuser is] here." She then recounted a more specific incident:

Two days ago...at the store...my son goes, 'I smell my dad here in the store.' Which I thought was kind of crazy...[Then] we happened to go out in the car, and as I was backing up, I happened to look in the rearview mirror and he (abuser) was standing behind my car. So, I thought, was he in the store when my son saw him, but couldn't voice . . . "he's peeking around the corner"?

In both examples, Mother 9 appeared to have understood her son's behaviors as a warning about the abuser's sudden presence despite his developmental age and communicative ability.

Mother 20 offered a different example of iterative, unspoken exchanges with her young son. Her abuser was described as highly coercive and violent, though he typically kept physical abuse hidden from their five-year-old (e.g., when he was asleep in another room or outside the home). During one physical episode, Mother 20's son was at his grandmother's house. When her son returned, Mother 20 described how he put his hand on her face. This action elicited a profound realization for her that "it hurt so much that his hands were on my face...It was my baby knowing that something was wrong with Mama." Although he hadn't witnessed the IPV, he seemed aware of his mother's distress; as Mother 20 shared, "he always knew something was terrible [though] he never saw anything." In these examples of signals from very young children, mothers' descriptions of their interactions reflect a recognition of their children's awareness about the IPV. The intent behind the children's actions can be interpreted in multiple ways, including concern, a sense of danger or harm, protectiveness, and fear - for their mothers, themselves, or both. While we cannot definitively pinpoint the intent represented by the action, we note that an apparent shared understanding had taken place between mother and child in this context of IPV.

Among older children, iterative signals appeared to take different forms. Mother 11, who had young toddler daughters prior to meeting her abuser, experienced severe physical and verbal abuse. She describes how her daughters' behaviors changed over time and became increasingly explicit. "They thought he was super cool at first. . . then he just became this monster." Mother 11 observed, "He wouldn't whoop 'em, but he would get upset and then it just became easier not to have kids . . . he didn't want the kids to see what he was doing to me." Her daughters were frequently at her brother's house when Mother 11 spent time with her abuser, which often entailed alcohol and substance abuse. Yet, despite the limited interactions between her daughters and the abuser, Mother 11 noticed their behaviors change, and attributed it to how the abuser treated her:

After a while, [Daughter 1] was kind of timid around him and kind of scared, and [Daughter 2] just always had an attitude with him. She wouldn't do anything that he said. . . They didn't like how he was talking to their mommy.

Mother 11 eventually left her abuser, a decision that appeared to have been influenced by her daughters' behaviors.

If it wasn't for the girls here, I probably would have been back because... it physically hurts to be apart from him . . . [but] staying with [abuser] affected my relationship with my kids. . . They knew he was being mean to mommy."

Subsequently, Mother 11's daughters began expressing themselves more explicitly: "When I was with him they felt they couldn't talk to me about stuff. . . When I got away. . . then they're all, 'I'm glad you did

that. I'm glad we don't have to see him anymore.'" Here, too, the implicit and explicit nature of Mother 11's daughters' behaviors can be construed in different ways. For example, did they change their attitude toward the abuser out of fear for themselves or for their mother? As an act of protection? Or in an appeal for protection? Perhaps a combination of these possibilities or other considerations?

Some signals were subtler than others, such as through omission, in which a decrease or lack of exchange about the abuse or abuser served as a signal between mother and child. For example, several mothers reported noticing that their children less frequently referenced or altogether omitted any mention of the abuser. Mother 5 had an older son from a previous relationship as well as a daughter and son with the abuser. The couple was together on and off for a period of five years. Similar to other mothers in this sample, Mother 5 tried to ensure that their children did not typically witness these episodes, and her oldest son usually lived with his grandmother. However, one particularly violent incident occurred in front of all three children that led Mother 5 to leave. Following that event and the resulting separation, she noted the children stopped asking about their father. Mother 5 shared: "They [used to] really ask a lot of questions, 'Where is Daddy? Is Daddy going to come with us? Why?' Then. But now they don't question it." A similar dynamic was described by Mother 10, who had three children with her partner who was physically abusive. She, too, explained that her children never saw the abuse. Still, after their separation, she shared, "They used to ask about him a lot, [now] they don't even ask about him no more."

Omissions were also found in relation to mothers. Mother 3 shared a son with her abuser, who was coercive and manipulative. She herself had grown up in a home where her mother had been abused. At the outset of her interview, she mentioned, "The only time my kid sees me cry, is if he's gotten really hurt, then I break down." Believing that crying would convey distress to her son about the IPV, Mother 3 described intentionally holding herself back from crying: "I don't ever let myself cry. And a friend asked me, 'When do you break down?' I go, 'When my kid moves out, that's when I'll break down.' It's like, he doesn't need to see any of it."

The meaning behind such omissions can also be interpreted in different ways. In the case of the mother who didn't cry, her gesture seems to signify a form of protection. Why the children no longer ask about their fathers could potentially signal to the mother that they are fine with or even prefer the abuser's absence. Possibly out of fear for themselves or their mother that he may return, and so would the abuse. Or the omission may signify something more benign, such as an understanding that a great deal of time has passed since their father had lived with them so the situation is now permanent. It was not possible to ascertain the intent from the interviews.

Iterative Signaling Realized in Relation to a Triggering Event

In other accounts, mothers described triggering events that led them to recall and realize the meaning of past signals. Mother 16 had been adopted and physically and sexually abused in her youth before meeting her abuser, who typically resorted to verbal abuse. She had three biological children with him. The signal described by Mother 16 relates to children's screams. Her children would scream at night, and she could not figure out why, though she would act to protect them despite not knowing the reason for their screams. But then a triggering event occurs, which helps her retrospectively understand the reason for their screams and why she had felt the need to protect them in the past, prior to the event. Mother 16 begins by describing the triggering event, "When I woke up and I couldn't see him on my bed ... and I saw him extremely butt naked in my daughter's room. He was sexually abusing my daughter. That's the day that I just ... my heart dropped." She then goes on to reference prior occasions when the children screamed, and she'd act protectively:

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[When] his own nieces and nephews from his side of the family [visited], I would lock all the kids up in the room and I would sleep with my kids. Then everything started to make sense, why the kids was screaming at night, why they would pee on the bed...right there ... that's one night I just knew that he had to go."

Prior to the triggering event, Mother 16 had registered the children's distress despite not discerning the reason for their screams and proceeded to lock them in the room with her at night. Once she discovered that he sexually abused their daughter, it became clear why the children had screamed in the past and what led her to protect them. Following her discovery of the incest, Mother 16 left the abuser.

Mother 9 also described ambiguous, iterative signals from her children which eventually led to realization and action. Of her three children, only the youngest was the biological child of the abuser. She noticed changes in her children's behavior, particularly her older son, "I talked to my son's doctor about the changes in him," such as that he was "starting to do worse in school. He was crying a lot of the time, he seemed like he was depressed or withdrawn a lot." After this realization, "I told my kids that we have our safe time to talk, . . . in the car when it's just me, [my son], and my daughter... Then I started learning that they actually wanted [abuser] gone and didn't want him here." Perceiving her son's changed behavior, she sought professional help, which led her to understand the adverse role the abuser played in her children's lives. She then created a safe space that prompted the children to verbalize their feelings, which also led her to act more definitively in separating from him: "I mean, that was probably the main thing that made me leave, was for my kids."

Mother 5's narrative also reflected a delayed realization of prior signals. Though she had attempted to shield her children from witnessing the abuse, Mother 5 indicated that her oldest son, the only one who was not the biological child of the abuser, had suspected abuse: "My oldest son . . . stayed at his grandma's but he'd always come to check on his mom which made me feel that maybe he knew... something." During one particularly violent event, her children came to witness the abuse and their intervention affected her profoundly, "[My son]...jumps on [the abuser's] back and, he didn't hurt him but I think [the abuser] stepped back and took a look at what he was doing. And I guess he shocked himself because he actually stopped...but at that point it was too late. I left him after that." Despite Mother 5's attempts to shield her children from the abuse, she came to realize her son had been aware that something was wrong. When he intervened to protect her one day, she also acted protectively in leaving the abuser.

Discussion

This secondary analysis extends previous work through its focus on mothers' descriptions of various types of interactions with their children in the IPV context that were meaningful and impactful. Mothers described a wide variety of signals (from giggles to verbal expression to behavioral changes) from their children, which they came to understand over time and/or in relation to a triggering event. Importantly, whether through iterative signaling, explicit or implicit exchanges, omissions, or overt action, all examples represented some degree of agency (Campbell & Mannell, 2016) among mothers and children.

The iterative signals sent by children of all ages reflect awareness of potential dangers surrounding the abuse (McManus et al., 2013), as well as defiance of it (Callaghan et al., 2016). Mothers' narratives revealed children had the capacity to initiate signals despite danger or limitations related to their age, and they appeared to do so repeatedly until mothers gradually understood. The repetition may have been necessary due to their developmental age (Colegrove & Havighurst, 2017), fear, and/or because their mothers simply were not receiving the messages. Indeed, within the context of

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coercive control that all mothers in this study experienced, they may have been too preoccupied with their own attempts to keep themselves and their children safe to notice the signals or act on them initially (Peled & Gil, 2011). Despite the dangers and the delayed understanding, the children persisted in their signaling, suggesting consistency with other studies that have reported children's ability to "assert their subjectivity, their agency (and) their capacity to resist" (Callaghan et al., 2016, p. 408) in an IPV context.

Our findings also support the different ways agency was manifested among mothers experiencing IPV (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Crann & Barata, 2016). Specifically, it appears that mothers in turn, came to see, hear, and understand the messages. They did so despite the added mental and emotional energy expended to survive the abuse (Anderson et al., 2014) and strategize on how to remain safe (Allen & Ni Raghallaigh, 2013). Mothers responded to their children's cues by creating safe spaces, encouraging children to speak, and becoming increasingly attuned and attentive to their children (Buchanan et al., 2014). They acted in resistance to the abuse and out of concern for the well-being of their children.

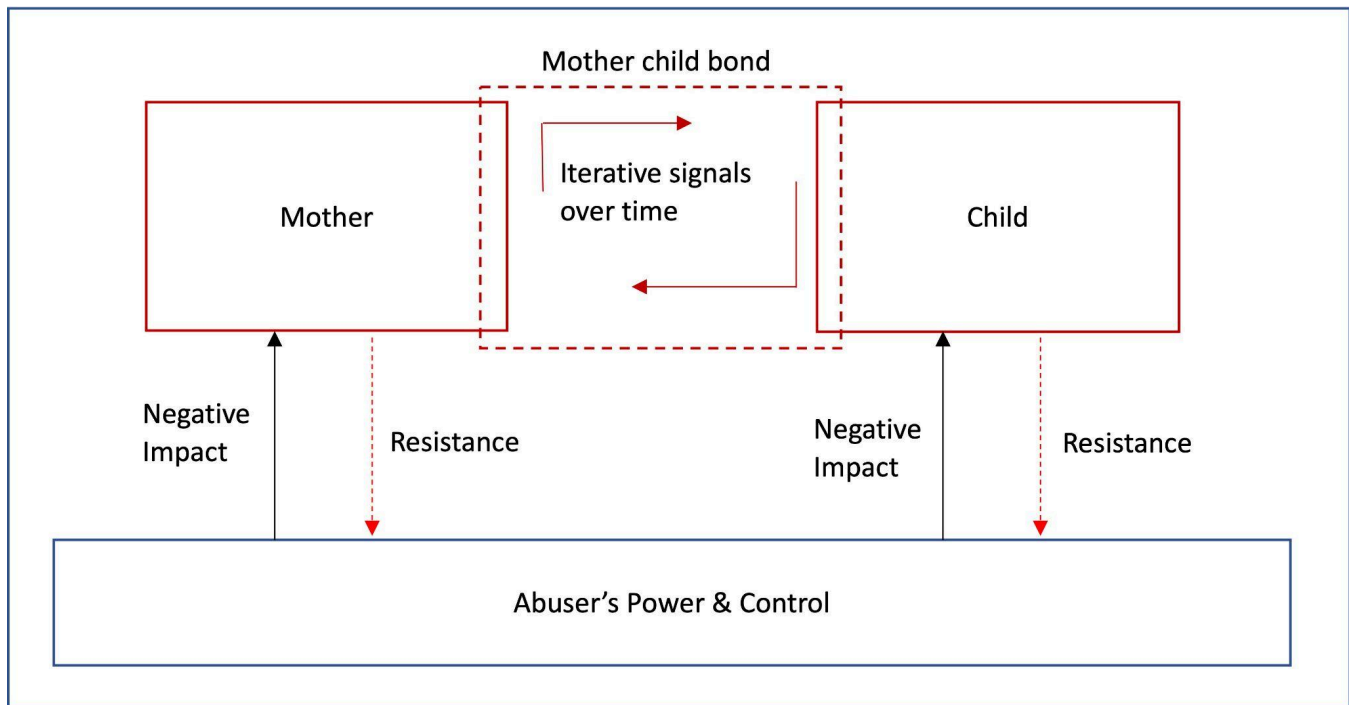
In sum, anecdotes shared by the mothers in this study indicate defiance of and resistance by both mothers and their children against the dangers and coercive control that pervaded their IPV context (Callaghan et al., 2016). Furthermore, as we saw in the case of Mothers 5 and 11, incremental interactions with their children seemed to have contributed to mothers' turning points, or shifts in their thinking (Crann & Barata, 2016), culminating in their increased propensity to resist and leave their abusers (author citation; McManus et al., 2013). Thus, through often subtle exchanges, mothers and their children simultaneously rebuffed the abuse and expressed concern and support for each other (Humphreys et al., 2006), gradually building a mutual resistance against the IPV (McManus et al., 2013; Pells et al., 2016).

Taken together, our analysis indicates that these iterative mother-child interactions (Colegrove & Havighurst, 2017) represent a constant, non-linear cycle of signaling, understanding, and acting in resistance to the abuse. Furthermore, the repetition of the signaling and mothers' effective registering of those signals suggests a sense of attunement between mothers and children as they eventually understand and act despite the ambiguity and danger. Arguably, this attunement is made possible by their constant interactions, which help nurture a sense of bonded connection between them (Beebe et al., 2016). Through their shared experiences and heightened levels of understanding in their interactions, mothers and children seemed to both draw on and strengthen their bond (Humphreys et al., 2006) in the context of the abuse.

These findings are reflected in an early conceptual model that explores the dynamic of mother-child interactions and its role in the IPV context (see Figure 1). Grounded in the data, our model suggests that while the negative impact of IPV is afflicted on the mother and/or child individually, a dynamic bidirectional process of iterative signals and exchanges continually occurs between them. Signals may be initiated by children or mothers. The signals also take many forms and can be subtle or explicit. The iterative nature of the signals enables mothers and children to interact with each other despite age or limitations, emotionality, danger, or fear. Importantly, through these iterations, mothers and children exchange signals representing an understanding about potential danger resulting from the abuser and resistance to the coercive nature of the threat. As such, the mother-child bond is both a source of strength to draw on and is reinforced by their exchanges and actions (Beebe et al., 2016; Humphreys et al., 2006).

Figure 1

Working Model of Iterative Signaling Between Mother and Child Representing Resistance in the IPV Context



Implications and Conclusion

These findings should be considered with limitations. Due to the nature of secondary data analysis, we were unable to ask questions directly pertaining to our research questions (Axelrod & Windell, 2012). Nevertheless, mothers volunteered observations and perceptions of their children's actions and expressions related to IPV in their narratives, which indicates these interactions were significant and meaningful. A second limitation is the absence of children's narratives. Future studies should consider engaging children of abused mothers with questions more directly focused on their interactions with mothers. Contextual factors such as gender, age, and race should also be factored in to assess if and how they might have different outcomes (Babin & Palazzolo, 2012). Another area to potentially explore is whether and how specific types of exchanges have greater impact on the mother-child bond in the IPV context. The working model proposed is merely a starting point toward understanding interactions as a strategy among abused women and children to resist control and violence.

Despite limitations, this secondary data analysis offers important practical and research implications. Supported by a strength-based feminist approach (Buchanan et al., 2014) that centered stories recounted by mothers about their experiences of abuse, this study explored alternative perspectives of mother-child interactions in IPV and identified important mother-child processes that had previously been overlooked. Furthermore, our model contributes to a more complex theoretical understanding of how agency may manifest for mothers and children. Despite living under coercive control, both mothers and children displayed agency in the way they interacted with each other and in how mothers supported their children's need to feel safe (Fogarty et al., 2019). Additionally, there is increasing consensus about the need to expand the definition of agency in IPV beyond the binaries of

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just staying and leaving (Crann & Barata, 2016). Our research extends prior work that highlights the explicit role of children in facilitating not only mothers' leaving (e.g., Katz, 2015) but also other safety-seeking behaviors.

An important consideration for future studies is how the type of abuse may affect the mother-child communication dynamics. In our study, mothers' retrospective accounts allowed us limited insights into this question, though we did find that regardless of the type of abuse, the children seemed to be affected by the IPV and sent signals nonetheless. All mothers experienced coercive control and/or physical abuse. Mother 9 specifically experienced coercive control. She described mostly erratic behaviors by her abuser intended to manipulate her, such as showing up unexpectedly in random places and inside her home. Still, when her toddler son giggled in a specific way, she knew the abuser was there. Additionally, her children were still impacted by her relationship with the abuser despite its non-violent but coercive nature, as we saw with her older son, who became withdrawn, had issues at school, and later vocalized that he wanted the abuser gone. Among mothers who experienced physical violence, almost all asserted that the abuse happened when the children were not around. But as we saw in Mother 11's story, her daughters still shifted their behavior and eventually became more outspoken about their wish for their mother to stay away from the abuser. Similarly, Mother 20 explained that though her partner physically abused her at night when their five-year-old son slept, he still knew that something was wrong. Thus, our findings suggest that children registered the abuse and signaled towards their mothers, regardless of the type of abuse experienced. However, given the inherent limitations of secondary analysis, future studies should more concertedly explore how various forms of abuse could result in differing communication dynamics between mother and child. Particularly when accounting for children's ages, gender, levels of awareness and understanding about the abuse, and its frequency, among other relevant factors.

Yet another important factor that should be considered by future studies is the relationship between the children and the abusers. Our study focused primarily on the mother-child interactions, and interviews did not include substantial information about the father-child relationship. Regardless of whether the abusers were the biological fathers or not, many mothers described their abusers as not being particularly involved or even interested in the children. When abusers were considered more "involved," their behaviors were described as having less to do with interacting with their children and more with using the children as a means to assert control over the mothers. This is exemplified in Mother 5's comment, "I don't think he would hurt them or abuse them or anything, but he'd probably just take them to get back at me. I believe that." Future studies should explore the father-child dynamic within the framework proposed here.

In terms of clinical applications, Kress et al. (2012) discuss various strategies counselors can offer children to keep themselves safe when IPV is present in their homes. Our findings build on these methods, offering counselors added insights (Adams, 2006) that recognize the importance of the unique nature of mother-child interactions. In building a greater understanding of possible mother-child signal exchanges and how these signals may be interpreted, counselors can help mothers identify expressions of anxiety, fear, or concern from their children (Stanley et al., 2012). Helping mothers see whether and to what extent their children are aware of, fear, and signal about the abuse can lead them to find ways to interact more openly and safely to understand their children's angst. For example, mothers can be coached to detect subtle signals from their children and advised on how to react and support their children. Additionally, emphasizing the value of and providing strategies for mothers to attempt more explicit exchanges with children in safe ways can offer protective factors (Babin & Palazzolo, 2012) and help in the repair process when mother-child relationships suffer (Humphreys et al., 2006). Finally,

improving their awareness about their children's signaling and feelings can also potentially advance mothers' consciousness-raising and planning to leave their abusers (Louis & Johnson, 2017).

Further developing means with which to support mothers and their children in the IPV context is crucial for a number of reasons. Mother-child interactions offer a powerful means through which mother and child reflect each other's moods, feelings, and reactions to each other, which also contributes to the child's development (Kokkinaki et al., 2017). Additionally, motherhood has been found to be a strength abused women draw on that helps them feel good about themselves and what they achieve in their mothering, as well as an area where they have more control over their lives (Semaan et al., 2013). As such, this study has many future directions with further research and clinical implications to consider.

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